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Articles

The Nicaraguan Insurgency: A Yearend Assessment

The fighting in Nicaragua, which exhibited peaks and lulls in intensity over the last year, appears stalemated, with little indication that either side can achieve a decisive edge in the near term. The course of the war has highlighted both the improved military capability of the Sandinista forces and the resiliency of the main insurgent group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN). Events also have underscored the rebels' vulnerability to supply problems and the vagaries of external supporters. The drain on Managua's economic and manpower resources has required tighter domestic controls while further diminishing the regime's popular support and driving new recruits to the FDN.

The Setting

Organized in 1981 by supporters of former President Somoza, the rebel forces have grown to include businessmen, civic oppositionists, and disaffected Sandinistas. The insurgents claim to be fighting for the original goals of the revolution—pluralism, a mixed economy, and nonalignment. Several political parties, businessmen's organizations, and independent labor unions comprise the small domestic opposition. In addition, the traditionally passive population of late has expressed disgruntlement over the economic situation, the draft, and state controls in a few spontaneous demonstrations, according to press reports.

Of the groups comprising the insurgency, the FDN is the largest—with some 18,000 troops—best equipped, and most viable. Staging out of Honduran bases, it operates widely in Nicaragua's northwest, central highlands, and south-central region. In the south, the forces of former Sandinista Eden Pastora have dwindled to an estimated 600 because of supply problems, poor leadership, and Sandinista military pressure. Although Pastora consistently has rejected

unity with the FDN.

The Indian insurgents operating on the Atlantic coast, who number about 1,200, also have been plagued by logistic shortfalls and political infighting. Several factions recently formed an umbrella organization, KISAN, and are coordinating actions with the FDN.

Government Strategy and Rebel Response

At the outset of 1985, Sandinista Defense Minister Humberto Ortega publicly declared it the year the insurgents would be defeated. To upgrade military capabilities, Managua increased the draft, organized elite counterinsurgency battalions—now numbering some 12 to 14—and acquired advanced Soviet equipment such as the Mi-25 helicopter gunship. In addition, press reported that the regime relocated much of the population in the northern border area to deny the FDN safehaven and create a free-fire zone. From February through May, the government pressured the insurgents in the north with artillery and multibattalion sweeps—interdicting infiltration routes, disrupting insurgent concentrations across the border in Honduras, and forcing the rebels to expend scarce ammunition.

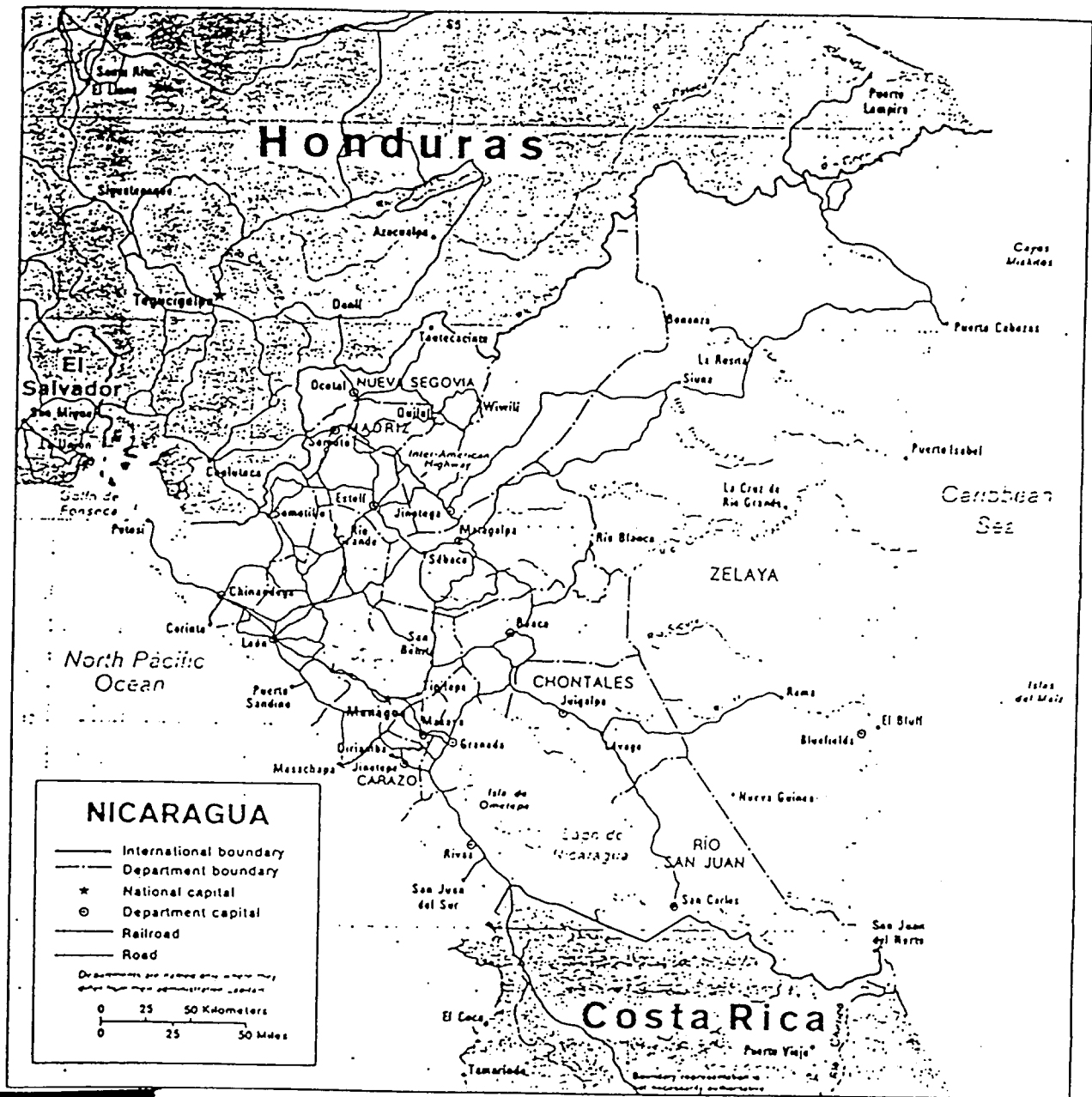
For their part, the anti-Sandinistas concentrated on small unit tactics and ambushes, maintaining their integrity as a fighting force and incorporating the swelling number of recruits that increased FDN ranks from 14,000 to 18,000 during the year.

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[REDACTED]

By late spring, the rebels had alleviated some of their supply difficulties, and an increasing number of troops were able to bypass Sandinista blocking positions along the border and penetrate deeper into Nicaragua.

[REDACTED] Moreover, the regime was forced to spread out its troops to counter expanded insurgent actions in central Zelaya, Boaco, and Chontales Departments. The FDN has sporadically challenged the regime with aggressive rebel attacks in Esteli and Chontales Departments in midsummer and along the vital arms route from Rama to Managua in the fall, demonstrating the resiliency of the insurgency. In November, Ortega publicly amended his prediction, admitting that the war probably will last into 1987.

Nonetheless, steady improvements in Sandinista capabilities and lingering rebel difficulties averted any significant shift in momentum toward the insurgents. The regime effectively employed both helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft for close air support and convoy escort, upgraded coordination between ground and air forces.

[REDACTED]

The Political Battle

Regime efforts to garner international support were undercut by repressive domestic policies, especially the expanded state of emergency announced in mid-October. The regime's foreign strategy centered on cultivating condemnation of the insurgency and of US aid to the rebel forces through the International Court

of Justice, Contadora regional peace negotiations, the United Nations, and other international bodies. Although these efforts have had some success, a variety of recent [REDACTED] press reports indicate some Latin and Western leaders are having second thoughts about their support for the Sandinistas. With the goal of denying the insurgents safehaven in neighboring countries, the regime increased diplomatic and military pressure—primarily through cross-border shelling—on Costa Rica and Honduras to agree to bilateral accommodations. At home, the Sandinistas reorganized the party and government bureaucracies, campaigned against corruption, and exhorted the population to increase revolutionary vigilance to counter US "aggression." Nonetheless, public dissatisfaction grew as a result of deepening economic hardships, tighter restrictions on civil liberties, and the renewal of military conscription.

[REDACTED]

Taking a page from the Sandinistas' book, the insurgents tried to improve their international image. In March, insurgent and exiled political leaders called for a dialogue with the regime—which Managua has repeatedly rejected—timed to coincide with a similar call by the internal opposition. In June, the formation of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) brought respected anti-Sandinista civilians into an umbrella organization incorporating the FDN and associated insurgent groups. Late in the year, UNO created a human rights staff and prosecuted some 20 FDN combatants for offenses committed against civilians. It also laid plans for a civic action medical program in the Honduran border area to promote good relations with the local population and authorities.

[REDACTED]

The FDN has failed, however, to develop a political support base within Nicaragua. While the traditional passivity of the Nicaraguan people and fear of government retaliation present significant constraints, the FDN's vague political program for Nicaragua's future apparently has not inspired the population to

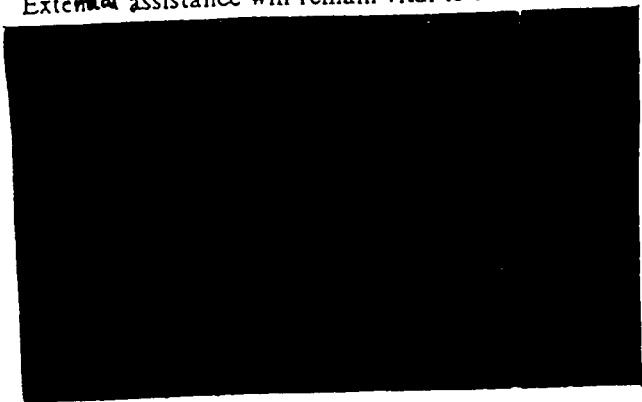
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translate its disgruntlement with the regime into acts of civil disobedience or graffiti campaigns in support of the rebel cause. [REDACTED]

Outlook

We expect that the Sandinista military will be able to meet most insurgent challenges over the next several months. Given increased government firepower and capabilities, the FDN will have to make significant strides in improving logistics, training, and command and control to give it the potential to shift momentum in its favor. [REDACTED]

External assistance will remain vital to each side.



Although neither side currently is poised for victory, continued domestic disgruntlement with the regime could provide new opportunities for the rebels to establish internal support networks and attract additional recruits. To do so, the FDN needs to move into the populated areas on the Pacific coast and renew its efforts to present itself as a viable alternative to the Sandinistas. [REDACTED]



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